

## Local government's role in disaster response

By Doug Holmes

Wildfires, floods, drought, heat domes, severe storms, landslides – something “unprecedented” seems to happen every year. With a surge in high-cost disasters comes a renewed focus on government's ability to manage emergency situations.

In Canada, crisis response is a shared responsibility between federal, provincial, local and Indigenous governments, with each level maintaining its own processes and response plans.

Local authorities such as the Fire Department are usually the first to deal with an emergency, and then it escalates up if local resources prove insufficient.

To provide a ‘home base’ for any major disaster response, and to provide overall coordination and communications, Council may activate an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) staffed by employees drawn from various municipal departments.

Since floods, fires and other disasters can easily spread across municipal boundaries, the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen (RDOS) may activate its EOC for an incident that also affects Summerland. In these cases, District of Summerland staff will provide relief within the regional EOC, allowing for around-the-clock coverage.

Both Council and the RDOS board have the authority to declare a state of local emergency in order to issue evacuation alerts and orders. Such a declaration is a temporary measure valid only for seven days.

Ordering residents to evacuate their homes is one of the most difficult decisions a local authority has to make. Timing is crucial: ordering an evacuation too early can expose unnecessary hardship to evacuees and create complacency for future emergencies while waiting too long could mean endangering lives with riskier escapes.

Typically, residents are first given an evacuation alert, followed later by an evacuation order if necessary. However, residents could be required to leave their homes with little warning if, for example, there's a flash flood or if a wildfire ignites out of control.

When an evacuation order is issued, RCMP officers or other first responders go door to door to tell people they must leave. It's also possible to receive emergency notifications and other communications through the Voyent! messaging system, which people can sign up for from the District of Summerland website at [www.summerland.ca/city-services/notifications](http://www.summerland.ca/city-services/notifications).

For any evacuation, the EOC identifies evacuation routes and works with local Emergency Support Services (ESS) to establish a reception centre to connect evacuees with shelter, food, and other essentials.

Volunteer ESS members help people get through what is probably the worst day of their life, and provide them a safe place to stay where they can consider their next steps. Their work can be described as ‘grace under pressure’ and anybody interested in joining the Summerland team can contact the Fire Department.

Local residents can also help out during an emergency by checking in on neighbours and relatives, and by looking after themselves. There's a saying that emergency preparedness begins at home, which means individuals and families should have provisions on hand to sustain them for at least 72 hours. An emergency kit list can be found on the District of Summerland web page under ‘Emergency Preparedness’.

*Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland*